

A refugee-centred perspective

Anita H Fábos

Part of Barbara Harrell-Bond's legacy is the example she set of a refugee-centred approach to forced migration and refugee studies.

On a Wednesday evening in early 2001, the large lecture hall at the American University in Cairo (AUC) was packed. The audience was largely made up of representatives of Cairo's growing numbers of Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Sierra Leonean refugees, with a sprinkling of academics and refugee service professionals, who had come to hear a representative from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, talk about its protection work in Egypt. This seminar series included presentations by each of the major agencies in Cairo who worked with refugees and was the brainchild of Barbara Harrell-Bond, who had joined AUC's interdisciplinary Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS) programme the previous summer as Distinguished Visiting Professor.

Barbara felt strongly that refugees ought to be front and centre of any initiative to produce or communicate information about their lives and experiences. Quite often, their questions and perspectives presented complex challenges to the humanitarians who addressed the weekly seminar audiences. "Why won't UNHCR help us? Why don't they make a camp for us here?", asked one desperate young man from Somalia. Week after week, refugees participated in our collective attempt to understand their displacement and the response of the humanitarian community in Cairo.

I was appointed as director of FMRS a few months after Barbara arrived. Although I was a young anthropologist in my first job, Barbara treated me as a key ally in bringing together research, education and outreach in a way that unsettled the status quo. I quickly learned that this meant asking hard questions of the international (mainly European and North American) helpers who, prior to Barbara's arrival in Cairo, were the knowledge-brokers in managing the needs of refugees. We set interns to

work taking stock of the disorganised networks of humanitarian agencies and workers, produced reports, wrote grants for research, recruited government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take our graduate diploma programme, convened the aforementioned weekly seminars and – as everywhere in Barbara's universe – started legal aid for refugees.

The pace of work over the first couple of years was extraordinary, and fraught with concerns about the Egyptian political environment, the university bureaucracy and Barbara's larger-than-life persona. When AUC renewed my contract, the provost told me that he considered me a 'firewall' between the university and its distinguished Oxford visitor. But it was only after I left to join the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of East London that I understood the impact of Barbara's vision of a refugee-centred agenda that prioritised refugee voices.

FMRS was set up along refugee-centred lines according to the tripartite model of education, research and outreach established by Barbara and colleagues at the Refugee Studies Programme (now Centre) at the University of Oxford. The three areas influenced and nourished each other, with FMRS researchers teaching classes and designing outreach programmes, students engaging with outreach and producing research, and refugees participating as learners, researchers and educators.

We found creative and sometimes bold ways to incorporate people from refugee backgrounds into our programmes and projects. With a mix of scholarships and work-study opportunities, the first class of graduate diploma students included four from refugee backgrounds, including the scholar-practitioner Leben Nelson Moro and the anthropologist Amira Ahmed, a former programme officer for the International

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Organisation for Migration. Any qualified person from a refugee background was accepted onto the short courses we ran for professionals, for a nominal fee. Several research projects led to important interventions, such as a nutrition support and safe sex education programme. As security concerns in Cairo grew, AUC required identification through passports or identity cards, which prevented people without documents or whose passports had expired in exile from attending seminars or workshops on campus. Arguing that FMRS's activities pressing for greater understanding of forced migration and refugee issues were unthinkable without including refugees, we found ways to negotiate their access with the university's Security Office.

Reshaping and recentring

So many of us who have worked with Barbara or been influenced by her stance have found ways to incorporate refugee perspectives into our programmes and projects, such as participatory planning, 'action research' with refugee communities (that is, collaboratively exploring community-identified problems), and scholarships for people from refugee backgrounds. However, while making room for 'refugee voices' in our research, teaching and practice is commendable, I worry that we are repeating the missteps of our well-meaning predecessors in women and gender studies. Critics of their attempts to redress male-dominated institutions by incorporating more women participants – the 'add women and stir' approach – did little to challenge persistent gender inequities.

Experiences of displacement and movement radically restructure a person's concept of home, place and belonging. Adding more refugee voices to institutions designed



Barbara teaching, circa 1980s.

for settled people, while more inclusive, does not fully address this new state. For a truly 'refugee-centred approach', we need to reshape our sedentary policies in order to accommodate 'movers' – those who have experienced displacement. Much research has been done with people whose diaspora networks and transnational livelihoods have given rise to altered perspectives that no longer tick our current identity boxes. Furthermore, policy analysis has made an important contribution to our understanding that national citizenship models offer fewer and fewer durable solutions for people displaced for decades. We will be unable to produce meaningful shared spaces for people on the move until we see human mobility – forced or otherwise – as an unexceptional state. Like the belated recognition that tackling women's needs and concerns through 'gender-neutral' programmes ended up reproducing solutions for men, we would do well to recognise how our norms and values in refugee studies must go beyond including refugees in structures that reproduce expectations of static settlement.

Recentring our work with refugees requires a paradigm shift but we can also take pragmatic actions in our teaching, research and practice. Refugee studies as a discipline needs many more scholars and researchers

from refugee backgrounds to help us rethink history and policy from the perspective of movers, and to incorporate transnational and translocal narratives alongside the more common refugee integration stories.

Professors devising reading lists could foreground studies presenting histories and experiences of movers. Practitioners working towards social integration could help both movers and 'local people' in communities learn to feel comfortable in a changing society that includes movers as equal partners. Donors could overcome their fear of mobile refugee researchers and community development practitioners in order to fund projects designed by and

for people from refugee backgrounds. Lastly, institutions that contribute to the field could do much more to recruit professionals from refugee backgrounds. This is not a question of lack of supply; the number of people with professional training and expertise as well as first-hand experience of forced migration continues to grow. Barbara Harrell-Bond would have applauded a shift in this direction.

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